

# What Do I Do

How the Magic of Mentoring Can Propel Your Aviation Learning Odyssey

# Now?!



Photo by James Williams

**Y**ou did it. The freshly-signed temporary airman certificate attesting to your new qualifications is carefully secured in your wallet. You rightly celebrate the achievement with proud family and friends. And, during this heady time, perhaps the exuberant words of Dr. Seuss in *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* ring in your head:

*You'll be on your way up! You'll be  
seeing great sights!  
You'll join the high fliers who soar to  
high heights.*

If your experience is anything like mine, you put the new certificate or rating to work right away. In command of your aircraft, you soar to (relatively) high heights and see some great sights. As the initial excitement fades, though, you realize that being liberated from the structures and strictures of a formal training

program can leave you feeling both adrift and – admit it – anxious. As Dr. Seuss's narrator notes, you know deep down that:

*There are some, down the road  
between hither and yon,  
that can scare you so much you  
won't want to go on.*

For too many pilots, here is the point where the once high-flying helium balloon starts sinking back to earth. Though you're weary of confining your flights to the geographical or functional limits of your experience, you lack the confidence to be like Columbus and sail off the edge of the known world. Or perhaps you *did* try to push the envelope, only to find that "here be dragons" that scorched your confidence and frightened family and friends who trusted their lives to your still-developing skills.

So what's a pilot to do?!

## Enter the Mentor

One way to proceed is to simply wander along the aviation learning path. Not knowing a better way, that's the path that many pilots (including me) pick by default. In my case, that "now-what?!" feeling was most acute when I finished my instrument rating in 1994 and then again when the FAA inspector handed over my initial flight instructor certificate in 1996. In both cases, I understood that I had a license to learn, as the cliché goes, but I wasn't at all clear on what I was supposed to learn, much less how best to learn it. And so, like the epic poet Homer's title character in *The Odyssey*, I stumbled and occasionally bumbled my way through a long and winding voyage of aeronautical discovery.

That's where a mentor comes in. Like the original Mentor, a character in *The Odyssey*, a modern-day mentor is a trusted advisor who provides one-to-one support, encouragement, and advice. You may already be familiar with the role a mentor can play in the workplace. The medical profession uses residency programs to provide supervised real world training for medical school graduates, and many other disciplines use forms of mentoring to help freshly-trained novices transition to real-world application of book knowledge and basic skills. For example, teacher certification boards require a stint of student teaching that pairs the novice with an experienced classroom instructor for both observation and supervised application of knowledge and skills. Mentoring can also be structured to give career guidance, provide a role model, and offer a seasoned sounding board for workplace challenges and ideas. In all cases, though, perhaps the mentor's most important function is to *transfer experience* by sharing events and outcomes that can help a less-experienced colleague learn faster while making fewer mistakes along the way.

An aviation mentor can serve the same functions for a less-experienced pilot. Let's look at some specific ways that an aviation mentor can help you navigate the aeronautical learning odyssey more safely and more effectively.

## Transfer Experience

The job of an aviation instructor is to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes appropriate to the certificate or rating at hand through the process of instruction. Although the aviation mentor can certainly play a role in advancing the pilot's knowledge, skills, and attitudes, both the goal and the process are different. Khalil Gibran eloquently

captures the concept in *The Prophet*, writing that the point is to "lead you to the threshold of your own mind" by offering experience to illuminate your individual decision-making process.

Though it shares some characteristics with the aviator's favorite sport—hangar flying—a mentor's transfer of experience is a more structured and thoughtful effort aimed at helping the less-experienced pilot apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes gained via the instructional process to individual real-world situations. A good mentor must therefore know not only how to impart

"there-I-was" stories of a relevant experience, but also how to listen to the mentored pilot's concerns, formulate questions to help address them, and tactfully offer appropriate feedback.

A word of advice: Whether you seek to find a mentor or to be one, be careful not to equate a mentor pilot's *total* time with *relevant* time. The mentor pilot must be able to offer experience that is pertinent to the needs and goals of the mentored pilot. For example, an airline pilot will clearly have substantial experience, but if his or her most recent aeronautical activity consists entirely of flying transport category airliners in a crew environment, that experience will not necessarily be relevant to someone flying single-pilot instrument meteorological conditions (IMC) in a typical GA aircraft. By the same token, a 100-hour private pilot who trained in a glass cockpit aircraft could transfer some of that experience to, say, a 1,000-hour pilot who has flown nothing but round-dial aircraft.

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Photo by Susan Parson





Photo by H. Dean Chamberlain

### Model Good Practices

There is much you can learn from a mentor who is a practitioner as well as a preacher of good aeronautical practices. My primary flight instructor, who also took me through an instrument rating, as well as my commercial and flight instructor

certificates, imparted knowledge, skills, and a professional attitude not just through what he said. Though his official role was “teacher” rather than “mentor,” his greatest long-term influence arose from

how he consistently modeled good practices. The instructor who guided me through multi-engine and multi-engine instructor qualifications has similar characteristics, and I literally trusted her with my life.

In the more recent years of my aeronautical learning journey, several pilots have unknowingly mentored me through their day-to-day actions. One was instrumental in showing me the ropes of long cross-country planning and operations.

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Another demonstrated the basic principles of crew coordination, and models the kind of calm but watchful demeanor I have sought to emulate in my instructional activities. And it was through flying GA aircraft around the country with still another pilot that I finally began to understand how to evaluate weather. Though he never specifically “taught” me, watching how he approached the process of gathering, evaluating, and applying weather data was invaluable to my learning. In fact, that’s what led me to develop the structured weather analysis model that I use today when I teach, write, and present on aviation weather and weather decision-making.

### Guide the Flight Path

In the workplace, one of the mentor’s main roles is to assist the mentee in setting and achieving career development goals. An aviation mentor can offer similar assistance to a pilot by helping him or her establish and work toward a range of aeronautical advancement goals. For example:

- *Certificates, ratings, and endorsements.* Work toward formal qualifications and privileges is primarily an instructional task, but an aviation mentor can help in a number of

## Traits of an Effective Mentor

To be most effective, a good mentor should have:

- Substantial experience that is relevant to the needs and goals of the mentored pilot.
- Good “bedside manner” that is friendly, affirming, non-judgmental, and respectful.
- Strong communication skills that include attentive listening and asking good questions.
- Clear understanding of the mentor’s role, which is to support and guide the mentored pilot’s efforts to apply knowledge and skills to real situations.
- Clear understanding of the pilot’s goals, to include knowledge of how the aircraft is to be used (i.e., recreational flying for fun, personal transportation for business or pleasure, professional operation).
- Personal connection with the mentored pilot.
- Mutual understanding of responsibilities. Both individuals must have a clear understanding of responsibilities—and liabilities—in the mentoring relationship. In general, the mentored pilot should always be PIC.

ways. By offering a sounding board, a fresh perspective, and simple encouragement to help surmount the inevitable learning plateaus, the mentor may play a vital role not only for the individual, but also for the broader goal of pilot retention.

- **Skill enhancement.** An aviation mentor can help a less-experienced pilot with a variety of skill enhancement goals and activities. The FAA’s online flight review and instrument proficiency check guides (*see below for links*) both contain worksheets to help pilots, mentors, and instructors develop an individualized plan for setting aviation goals, as well as tips for structuring proficiency development and practice sessions. Similarly, the FAA’s online mentoring guide suggests specific ways that a mentor pilot can help a less-experienced pilot gain proficiency flying in IMC.
- **Confidence building.** By providing guidance and, as appropriate, cockpit companionship on skill development flights, an aviation mentor can contribute substantially to building a less-experienced pilot’s competence and confidence.

## Offer Encouragement

Let’s face it: flying isn’t easy. Sometimes you think the skills will never come. Or, you may find

yourself discouraged by a string of weather or mechanical delays. We’ve all had days when we wondered if it was really worth the effort it demands. When those days arrive, a mentor’s encouragement and support can make all the difference in your aviation learning odyssey.

And, finally, an aviation mentor can help ensure that:

*Wherever you fly, you’ll be the best of the best. Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.*

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## Learn More

### Conducting an Effective Flight Review

[www.faa.gov/pilots/training/media/flight\\_review.pdf](http://www.faa.gov/pilots/training/media/flight_review.pdf)

### Instrument Proficiency Check Guidance

[www.faa.gov/pilots/training/media/IPC\\_Guidance.pdf](http://www.faa.gov/pilots/training/media/IPC_Guidance.pdf)

### Best Practices for Mentoring in Flight Instruction

[www.faa.gov/training\\_testing/training/media/mentoring\\_best\\_practices.pdf](http://www.faa.gov/training_testing/training/media/mentoring_best_practices.pdf)

### GA Pilot’s Weather Guide (online version)

[www.hf.faa.gov/WeatherDecisionGuide/default.aspx](http://www.hf.faa.gov/WeatherDecisionGuide/default.aspx)



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